

Building on Strengths: Enhancing Protective Factors for Children and Families

Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers are increasingly thinking about personal, family, and environmental factors that strengthen families and reduce the risk of abuse and neglect within families. Research shows that while certain risk factors have detrimental effects on children and families, other “protective” factors can mitigate those effects and provide benefits, resulting in greater resilience for parents and children. Successful family support activities and child abuse prevention programs are designed to promote these protective factors.

A body of research has identified protective factors known to be correlated with reductions in child abuse and neglect:

- ☆ Parental resilience
- ☆ Nurturing and attachment
- ☆ Social connections
- ☆ Knowledge of parenting and child development
- ☆ Effective problem solving and communication skills
- ☆ Concrete support in times of need
- ☆ Social and emotional competence of children
- ☆ Healthy marriages

Family Support Strategies for Building on Strengths*

Research has found that the following are effective strategies that family support and child abuse prevention programs can use to promote these protective factors:

- ☆ **Facilitate friendships and mutual support.** Offer opportunities for parents in the neighborhood to get to know each other, develop mutual support systems, and take leadership roles. Strategies may include sports teams, potlucks, classes, advisory groups, board leadership, and volunteer opportunities.
- ☆ **Strengthen parenting.** Develop ways for parents to get support on parenting issues when they need it. Possibilities include classes, support groups, home visits, tip sheets in pediatricians’ offices, and resource libraries.
- ☆ **Respond to family crises.** Offer extra support to families when they need it, as in times of illness, job loss, housing problems, and other stressors.
- ☆ **Link families to services and opportunities.** Provide referrals for job training, education, health care, mental health, and local faith-based and community services.
- ☆ **Value and support parents.** The relationship between parents and staff is essential to a program’s ability to connect with parents. The support, training, and supervision of staff are essential to help them do this effectively.
- ☆ **Facilitate children’s social and emotional development.** Some programs use curriculums that specifically focus on helping children articulate their feelings and get along with others. When children bring home what they learn in the classroom, parents benefit as well.
- ☆ **Observe and respond to early warning signs of child abuse or neglect.** Train staff to observe children carefully and respond at the first sign of difficulty. Early intervention can help ensure children are safe and parents get the support and services they need.

* Adapted from Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and Center for the Study of Social Policy, *Strengthening Families through early care & education*. Find more information at http://www.cssp.org/doris_duke/index.html.



Effective Prevention Programs for Building on Strengths

In fiscal year 2003, the Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, released the report, *Emerging Practices in the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect*. This report was the result of a three-year project to gather and disseminate new information on effective and innovative prevention programs. Under the guidance of an advisory group of experts in the field of child abuse prevention, including both researchers and practitioners, the Office on Child Abuse and Neglect evaluated many nominated prevention programs, looking for those that conducted rigorous program evaluation and showed positive outcomes. A total of 10 programs were selected as either effective or innovative, and 12 more programs were highlighted as having some noteworthy aspects. The report included an overview of the types of prevention programs that exist today, as well as a summary of research on the effectiveness of prevention programs.

Find the full report in the Prevention section of the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information website at <http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/emerging/report/index.cfm>.

Evaluation Resources

The FRIENDS National Resource Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) has a strong background in and commitment to helping CBCAP organizations improve their program outcome evaluations. As a step in this ongoing effort, FRIENDS is developing resources that prevention programs can use to evaluate their effectiveness. Prevention program managers, administrators, and others can use this information to help them gather evidence that their programs are making meaningful differences to families and children. Information will be available on topics such as building a logic model, outcomes and indicators, useful measures and instruments, and other resources.

The FRIENDS Evaluation Toolkit is being developed by the FRIENDS National Resource Center, a service of the Children's Bureau, in partnership with a group of representatives from the CBCAP lead agencies, parents, prevention program administrators and managers, and researchers. For more information, visit the FRIENDS website at www.friendsnrc.org and click on outcome accountability.

